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PROGRAM The McLaughlin Group

STATION WRC-TV

DATE April 9, 1983 7:30 P.M.

CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT CIA/Nicaragua

JOHN MCLAUGHLIN: Guerrilla fighters in Nicaragua are staging insurgent activities within Nicaragua and in Honduras, contiguous Honduras, against the Sandinista regime back in Nicaragua. The United States, notably the CIA, is reportedly supplying covert aid to these contras. Covert, by the way, means secret, Mort. And high-ranking...

MORTON KONDRACKE: Contras means against.

MCLAUGHLIN: Very good, Mort.

And high-ranking officials in the Department of State are saying that this covert help may be illegal. Some congressmen are saying, indeed, that the President has not fully informed them as to the extent of the help, and he also may be behaving in a way that can be characterized as illegal.

Who's right and who's wrong on this inflamed issue?

KONDRACKE: Well, the law on the subject is the Boland Amendment, passed last December, which says that we shouldn't give any aid to these contras for the purpose of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government or provoking a war between Honduras and Nicaragua.

Now, there are 2000 or so -- possibly 5000 -- guerrillas inside Nicaragua at any particular time. And it's very difficult for me to see how 2000 guerrillas can topple a government which has 25,000 men in arms, Soviet tanks, and about 50,000 militia-men.

So, I don't see that the law is being violated. And

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furthermore, the United States, if you believe the Reagan Administration -- and on this I happen to believe them -- the purpose, our purpose involved in all of this is to force the Nicaraguans to stop sending in arms to El Salvador. And I think that the Congress is overreacting, is overfearful, and ought to let the Administration go ahead.

MCLAUGHLIN: I think that's an exceptionally enlightened thought, especially from Mort.

JACK GERMOND: I think Mort believes in the Easter Bunny. The evidence on what we're doing there is so overwhelming from independent sources that the idea that all we're trying to do is interdict a movement in one direction, a movement toward El Salvador, I think is nonsense.

ROBERT NOVAK: Unfortunately, I have to agree with Jack, 'cause I really dislike disagreeing with Morton on something like that when I think he's trying to take the right position.

The truth of the matter is that there are people in this government in policymaking affairs who, correctly, in my opinion, believe that we are going to lose the entire Central American peninsula, we're going to have a terrible subversion in Mexico until and unless the cancer is removed from Nicaragua. And this is a cancer-removing operation. And if the media would get off the backs and the Congress would get off the backs of the government...

GERMOND: Wait a minute. Are you arguing that the media shouldn't cover and expose what we're doing there?

NOVAK: I think it almost borders on disloyalty, not so much printing these secret documents, but leaking secret documents in the press.

GERMOND: Let me make one other point here. It's obvious. If you'd have had that leak that the New York Times had last week, you wouldn't have printed it? You'd have been screaming at the top of your lungs.

NOVAK: I think Evans and Novak always try to be patriotic...

JOSEPH KRAFT: ...being overwhelmed by our preferences and passions, and not paying attention to the evidence, which I think is extremely confusing. But almost all the evidence, particularly the story that the Administration is being opposed from within by State Department officials, and the leak, come out of the White House. And while I don't think I fully understand what's going on, and I really am confused, the one interpretation

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that makes any sense to me is that the White House is getting ready to dump the operation, that they know it is not going to be successful, that they know it is not all that serious, and they are (A) blaming low-level or medium-level State Department officials and (B), through that leak, blaming General Haig, who got them into it.

MCLAUGHLIN: A quick caucus question, please, Bob, if you don't mind my interrupting you. And that is this: Do you support covert aid to the guerrilla Nicaraguans seeking to overthrow the Sandinista regime? Yes or no.

Joe.

KRAFT: I'm not against it in principle.

MCLAUGHLIN: Bob.

NOVAK: Yes, but it should be more covert.

MCLAUGHLIN: Jack.

GERMOND: Well, I am against it in principle. I think it's a very foolish thing for us to be doing.

MCLAUGHLIN: Mort.

KONDRACKE: I'm in favor of it in principle. I would help democratic forces rather than Somozistas.

[Confusion of voices]

MCLAUGHLIN: You ask Mort, does he love his mother, and he says yes and no. Right.

Now listen, Mort. The answer is yes.